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ABSTRACT

Policy analysts approach problems of decision-making from two distinct perspectives: rational-comprehensive and incremental. This paper examines the theory behind both perspectives and argues that incrementalism may be a more appropriate strategy for applied decision-making in education. In considering the appropriateness of applying incrementalism to a specific situation, the following environmental characteristics must be assessed: threshold on critical mass effects, structural decomposability, sleeper effects, and the issue attention cycle. In addition, the organizational characteristics of redundancy of resources, distribution of power, and maturity of the organization must be evaluated. Educational organizations are precluded from disruptive shifts in policy and thus are characterized by an incremental, additive approach to policy. Rationalization of educational policy in the United States is made difficult by the decentralized character of the system, the jealously guarded prerogative of local control, the predominance of short-term issues, and sudden swings in public demands. All of these conditions seem to call for incrementalism. Other characteristics showing a predisposition for incrementalism are abundance of resources (found in the redundancy in organization at the local and state levels), the availability of a bargaining arena, and organizational maturity. (Author/WD)

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POLICY ANALYSIS IN EDUCATION: THE CASE FOR INCREMENTALISM

Lelia B. Helms

Policy analysis is entering the terminology and practice of educational decision making in a major way in the 1980s. As competition for resources increases, educational policymakers search for decision-making strategies useful in facilitating the process of sorting out and acting upon competing needs and complex problems. For many, policy analysis appears to offer promise as both a conceptual framework and an organizing process for introducing a greater degree of manageability into the field of applied educational decision making.

Policy analysts approach problems of decision making from two fundamentally distinct perspectives: rational-comprehensive and incremental. This difference in approach conditions much of the dialogue and research in the field of policy analysis. As educators seeking to apply this literature to problems of educational decision making, it is important that both sides of this long-standing academic debate over decision making in policy analysis receive broad circulation and be subjected to close scrutiny by practitioners as well as by researchers.

Most of the existing educational literature on policy analysis either advocates or employs the rational-comprehensive approach to educational policy. The reasons for this are several and most probably originate in the bias of the academic community towards a progressive and intellectually based rationalism, that is, the belief that reason is the primary source of knowledge. The allure of the rational-comprehensive model rests in its emphasis upon searching out values and incorporating the best knowledge available into the decision-making process. Educators appear to be drawn to a decision-making strategy based on the value of knowledge, the basic commodity of education. Intellectually appealing, this strategy has serious limitations in practice. In the real world of decision making, the rational-comprehensive approach is frequently discarded or utilized only retrospectively. Moreover, it is poorly suited to the organizational processes and environmental dynamics of education where procedure frequently dominates substance. This mismatch is, unfortunately, often ignored by proponents who prefer intellectual clarity to the uncertainty of procedural tinkering.

The argument to be presented here is that incrementalism better describes the process and parameters of decision making in education. Indeed, incrementalism may serve as a more appropriate strategy for applied decision making and as a model for teaching in educational policymaking in the future. The purpose of this paper is to review the concepts on incrementalism from the available policy analysis and public administration literature and to indicate the applicability of this knowledge to decision making in education.

Theory

Briefly, the traditional model of rational-comprehensive decision making may be characterized by the following:

1. Clarification of values or objectives is distinct from and usually prerequisite to empirical analysis of alternative policies.
2. Policy formulation is therefore approached through means-ends analysis: First the ends are isolated, then the means to achieve them are sought.
3. The test of a "good" policy is that it can be shown to be the most appropriate means to desired ends.
4. Analysis is comprehensive; every important, relevant factor is taken into account.
5. Theory is often heavily relied upon.[1]

The contrasting model of incrementalism was first set forth by Lindblom 21 years ago. It consists of eight related attributes which combine to provide a systematic framework or strategy for problem solving.

1. Choices are made in a given political universe at the margin of the status quo.
2. A restricted variety of policy alternatives is considered and these alternatives are incremental, or small, changes in the status quo.
3. A restricted number of consequences are considered for any given policy.
4. Adjustments are made in the objectives of policy in order to conform to given means of policy, implying a reciprocal relationship between ends and means.
5. Problems are reconstructed, or transformed, in the course of exploring relevant data.
6. Analysis and evaluation occur sequentially, with the result that policy consists of a long chain of amended choices.
7. Analysis and evaluation are oriented toward remedying a negatively perceived situation, rather than toward reaching a preconceived goal.
8. Analysis and evaluation are undertaken throughout society, that is, the locus of these activities is fragmented or disjointed.[2]

The framework of incrementalism for policymaking presumes the complexity of social processes and the consequent impossibility of determining in advance exactly what the results of policy might be. It describes the way in which decisions are actually made within organizations. Incremental policymaking is a strategy of decision making designed to reflect the "give and take" among organizational participants. It incorporates the concept of political expediency (or partisan mutual adjustment) where matters for discussion among organizational decision makers consist primarily of modifications to existing programs rather than of solutions to problems involving significant change. It acknowledges that decision making is always con-

ditioned by scarcity in the key resources of time and information as well as by the need to minimize risk and uncertainty to decision maker and organization alike. Incremental policymaking also presumes the necessity and utility of feedback and the consequent process of continuous mutual adjustment by participants in the decision-making process. This responsiveness is a form of tinkering which is facilitated by operating at the margin of change.

Incrementalism encompasses three basic strategic components for decision making in complex organizational settings. First, in order to avoid problems of goal displacement and to encourage innovation without risking organizational survival, an incrementalist decision-making strategy substitutes marginal experimentation for a priori policy analysis and substitutes sensitivity to feedback for coordinative planning. Second is a term coined by Lindblom, "partisan mutual adjustment,"[3] which describes the marketlike mechanisms upon which policy coordination relies. Coordination is achieved "epiphenomenally, as the byproduct of autonomous efforts by various actors to achieve their objectives through ad hoc accommodations with other actors."[4] Competing organizational decisionmakers are said "to match the allocation of resources to aggregate preferences much more satisfactorily than centrally sponsored attempts to achieve coordination through standardization, schedules, and plans."[5] Third, it provides a strategy for inquiry and policy development. The steps within this strategy are as follows:

1. Start with an informed hypothesis about the system.
2. On that basis, nonarbitrarily select the incremental intervention that is expected to maximize utility, subject to the constraint that whichever course of action is pursued must be reversible.
3. Observe the results of the interventions to obtain data regarding the comparative advantages of alternative courses of action.
4. Revise the hypothesis, or change it if necessary.
5. Repeat the procedure, backtracking and pursuing an alternative course of action if the revised theory so indicates.[6]

The work of Lindblom and other incrementalists is based on two fundamental premises about the nature of the policy process which must be understood if policy analysis is to be a socially useful tool.

> First, understanding a social problem is not always necessary for its amelioration—a simple fact still widely overlooked.[7]
>
> Second, all analysis is incomplete, and all incomplete analysis may fail to grasp what turns out to be critical to good policy . . . The choice between synoptic (rational-comprehensive) and disjointed incrementalism . . . is simply between ill-considered, often accidental incompleteness on one hand, and deliberate, designed incompleteness on the other.[8]

In the 21 years since its introduction into the literature of public administration, the incrementalist theory of decision making continues to be attractive as strategy for, as well as a theory of, decision making. It conditions the basic conceptual framework and teaching strategies in the fields of policy analysis and public administration[9] as a decision-making strategy designed to produce limited, practicable, acceptable decisions. For educators it offers some promise of introducing a measure of manageability into policymaking by emphasizing process over substance and by recognizing that short-term accommodations drive out long-term solutions.

Criteria and Circumstances for Application

The policy environment conditions the strategy of decision making available to the policymaker. It is argued here that the environment and organization of education strongly predispose toward the choice of an incremental rather than a rational-comprehensive approach to decision making in the area of educational policy. The reasons for this should become clear as the relationship between each of the environmental and organizational factors weighing upon the choice of an incremental as opposed to a rational-comprehensive strategy is assessed for educational policy at all levels—local, state and federal.

Several organizational and environmental limitations upon incremental decision making have been described in the general literature of policy analysis. These include a series of factors or conditions which condition the utility of applying an incremental approach to certain categories of problems. Those environmental characteristics which must be assessed when considering the appropriateness of incrementalism include: *threshold* or critical mass *effects*, the *structural decomposability* of the particular problem, *sleeper effects*, and the *issue attention cycle*. Those organizational characteristics which must be assessed include the *redundancy of resources*, the *distribution of power*, and the *maturity of the organization*. The ability of a decision maker to integrate these factors into consideration of which decision-making strategy to employ will enhance the quality of the decision actually made.

A. Threshold or Critical Mass Effects

Certain types of policy enterprises have been characterized in the literature[10] which do not appear to be well adapted to incremental decision strategy. These are "enterprises distinguished by their demand for comprehensive rather than incremental decisions" and "policies characterized by an indivisibility in the political commitment and resources they require for success."[11]

This small but significant class of policies which are not conducive to incremental decisions has several distinguishing features. These include policy situations where the application of new technologies to major political or social problems requires a large-scale, risk-taking effort in order to approximate acceptable levels of performance. Policy dealing with protection for the public from the resultant radiation pollution in a nuclear power plant malfunction is one example where a trial and error learning approach to policy development is not acceptable. In such a case, policy must be comprehensively and centrally designed against all the worst case scenarios. This class of policy decisions is characterized by an order of magnitude sufficient to foreclose the incrementalist approach.

The general term *threshold effects* is employed to describe this class of policy decisions. Policies which depend for their success upon factors which come into play only at high levels of political and resource commitment and at a sufficient magnitude of change are less susceptible to incremental decision making. "Nonincremental policy pursuits are beset by organizational thresholds or 'critical mass' points closely associated with their initiation and subsequent development."[12]

Educational policy is characterized by few such threshold or critical mass effects. As a well-established and highly developed policy enterprise, education is not subject to many of the start-up and critical mass effects which characterize the development of a few, usually new, policy areas. Nor do most categories of educational policy involve high levels of immediate visible and dangerous risk or complex networks of expensive technology in order to function. Consequently, the impact of *threshold effects* upon education is most clearly seen in the area of educational innovation at all levels—federal, state, and local. The practical difficulty of assembling a coalition sufficient to decide upon and then to implement a policy option is frequently associated with the magnitude of the change under consideration. As a result existing programs endure with varying degrees of minor changes. Change occurs marginally, usually supplementing rather than eliminating the existing. When major change is contemplated, such as a voucher system for education, community control of schools, or even

complete revision of a district curriculum, it founders. Such major reform programs are unable to assemble sufficient impetus to overcome existing interests and inertia. It is exceedingly difficult to attain the critical mass necessary for substantial change in education at any level. As chronologically and structurally mature enterprises, educational organizations are precluded from disruptive shifts in policy. This, in part, explains the difficulty of developing and implementing policies involving substantial change in education and the bias toward an incremental and additive approach to policy.

B. Degree of Structural Decomposability of the Task Environment

The task environment to which policy is addressed may require very different forms of response and decision strategies. Some policy problems cannot be readily broken down into component parts and consequently are responsive to rational rather than incremental decision making. To illustrate the relationship between task environment and the problem-solving approach to be employed:

> Consider two societies, each endeavoring to use and protect water resources as efficiently as possible. Assume that both societies are trying to cope with an equal water-land-population ratio and that both confront similar degrees of uncertainty as to how the water resources of their societies could and should be exploited. The water resources of one society, however, are divided among many separate watersheds, no one of which contains more than 10 percent of the water resources of the society as a whole. In contrast, 90 percent of the second society's water resources are concentrated in one watershed, for example, a large river.[13]

In this case, a strategy of incremental decision making is more attractive and applicable in the former rather than in the latter country. The latter faces a task environment which is far less decomposable. Consequently, centrally coordinated and comprehensive policy will provide better policy outcomes for the latter. Again, the degree of structural decomposability in the policy environment is critical in determining the appropriate strategy of decision.

The organization and delivery of education in this country is highly decentralized. This constitutes a broadly *decomposed task environment* more suited to incrementalist than rationalist strategies of decision making. With independently organized levels of educational government and with relatively few incentives to coordinate and centralize, education functions in an environment which is structurally decomposed, geographically dispersed, and at odds with the logic of comprehensive and rational policymaking.

Examples of the difficulties facing policymakers attempting to rationalize educational policy within its environmental constraints are myriad. The task for federal policymakers attempting to create incentives to coordinate or standardize some area of policy is most difficult. The well-documented elusiveness of instituting meaningful programs of school integration clearly illustrates the difficulties of rational policymaking in education. Even when policy, such as civil rights legislation, can be coordinated and articulated at the federal level of decision making, it is reinterpreted and dispersed in the implementation phase at the local level. At the state and local level the varieties of school district organization and needs reduce the frequency and utility of centralized policymaking. Local control is a jealously guarded prerogative. This independence and decentralization characterize education far more than most policy enterprises and creates strong bias towards an incremental approach to policy problems. Moreover, it offers some insight into the limits of federal policymaking efforts in public education as it is presently structured.

C. Sleeper Effects

Sleeper effects offer a third class of environmental characteristics which must be considered in assessing the utility of various decision-making strategies.[14] Sleeper effects appear only over time and usually result from a delayed reaction or from the effect of the gradual buildup of a causal chain. It is not the positive or negative consequences of sleeper effects but the delay or miscuing in feedback and consequent policy adaptation which are of concern in a decision-making strategy.

Two types of sleeper effects pose difficulties for policymakers. The first results from a *long lag time* in producing reliable feedback. Here, sleeper effects mislead by appearing late and distorting the evaluation process. For example, thalidomide and DES were approved for general use when careful testing revealed no harmful effects on those actually ingesting them. Insufficient time lag was built into the testing policy for these drugs so that negative feedback was not available to those approving the drugs. A second category of sleeper effect is the case in which *too much feedback* overwhelms the responsible decision units and causes policy adaptation where such changes may be unwarranted. Initial results, particularly where negative and voluminous, can skew policy evaluation and mislead assessment.

The difficulty of understanding policy impacts and of building sufficient time delay into policy evaluation and assessment mechanisms is common to all decision strategies. It is accentuated by the nature of the educational process where both forms of sleeper effects have exaggerated impact upon policymaking. Since both are generic, in terms of the structure and substance of education, neither one is susceptible to correction by employing a specific decision-making strategy. Education, as a social process, remains beyond the bounds of accurate evaluation and feedback in many areas.

Long lag time characterizes the assessment and evaluation of most educational programs. The educational policy environment leaves decision makers particularly susceptible to this distortion. Program areas as broad as human relations or as narrowly defined as a choice between two math curricula cannot be accurately evaluated within the practical limits of time, cost, and resources which constrain policymaking. The long-term sociological, behavioral, and economic effects of such educational programs are often only discernible in the next generation. Yet the structure of the policymaking situation responds to the most immediate and voluminous feedback for evaluation and adaptation. Consequently, it is difficult to assess with accuracy and confidence the impact of any specific educational policy and feed that information back into the policy cycle. Beyond the immediate and controversial direct tests of achievement, there are few well-developed means to evaluate the role of education longitudinally. It takes a generation in lead time to evaluate the impact of many educational policy changes yet, rarely, is a generation allowed before evaluation and change occur.

The other facet of sleeper effects consequently dominates educational policymaking. *Overreaction*, conditioned by too short a feedback cycle, causes policy to change before results can be meaningfully assessed. The political structure of education, particularly at the local level, encourages feedback and often impatience with the slow nature of the cycle of educational evaluation. Review of the varied results from social programs emphasizing equity in educational institutions and programs reveals a pattern of cyclical reform and frustration with only token or tangential evaluation. The responsiveness that is built into the democratic and participatory value structure of our educational system thus miscues the evaluation phase. Policy modifications occur more as a result of the structure of the educational political process than

as a result of any intrinsic educational value or effect. In the structure we have created for education, particularly at the district level, process often dominates substance. Short-term issues drive out long-term considerations. As a result, there is a structural bias towards incremental policymaking.

D. Issue Attention Cycle Effects

A final environmental component conditioning the choice of decision strategy is that of the *issue attention cycle*.[15] Public opinion oscillates freely within our political system by frequently enlarging rapidly and then declining suddenly. As an independent political system, education is subject to the vagaries of public opinion. However, "public policy is not similarly free to move smoothly along a continuum insofar as its scales are concerned."[16] Policy responses instead depend upon a number of organizational parameters, such as the yearly cycles of budget, personnel contracts, and scheduling, which mold policy reactions into step-wise patterns of increments or decrements. Policy ordinarily conforms to these constraints once established.

Problems arise, however, when public attention focuses on a specific issue or policy area and introduces discontinuities into the policy cycle. At this point the structure of decision making by increments is disrupted. If major changes are to occur, they emerge at such points and are by definition nonincremental. "Nonincremental policies in particular must expand greatly if they are to expand at all. Only then can they overcome the inertia, external resistance, or internal start-up problems which act as barriers to policy expansion."[17] Public attention and shifts in expectations create discontinuities in policy development as well as opportunities for major changes.

The issue attention-policy response cycle has certain identifiable stages. The first is *underscaling* where public concern defines a specific underserved area as important. In education, underscaling is illustrated by the period from the mid 1950s to 1965 in which a role for the federal government in education was slowly defined and enacted. During this period, existing policy patterns were viewed as unsatisfactory. Pressures for change built. However, despite public concern there are always barriers to overcoming the inertia or underscaling in policy response. One major obstacle is simply "thinking small" and "thinking routinely." A second obstacle is that of consolidating control over those organizational operations upon which change is predicated. Both of these reflect the bureaucratic tendency to prefer stability and predictability and the organizational bias towards incremental policymaking. Rational-comprehensive change requires new information and initiative as well as extensive, centralized administrative coordination.

In order to address public concern over underscaling, policy planners must envision major or radical changes, and a large scale of response is used to overcome threshold effects and start-up costs and to demonstrate urgency and purpose. There is a *capture point*[18] at this stage in which public concern must be translated into specific commitments of goals and resources. In order to capture the prerequisite, continuing, critical mass of support, goals must be set and promises made. Emphasis upon crisis or drama is often used in order to create sufficient momentum to begin to motivate participants, to coordinate policy, and to respond to public expectations. Passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was such a capture point in education. The coincidence of Kennedy's death and Johnson's skill in legislating Great Society programs joined a new policy approach to an expanded constituency base.

However, once developed, rational-comprehensive policy solutions frequently enter a third stage of *overscaling*, where policy performance exceeds public demand. Frequently results are overpromised and unattainable. When sold to the public as the means to social equalization or mobility, educational programs are frequently susceptible to such overscaling. Unable to overcome initial effects of socioeconomic background, Project Head start has been forced to modify initial policy expectations in the struggle to maintain a viable base and programs. The discontinuous nature of major policy change makes it difficult to match organizational performance to public demand. As has been indicated, the issue attention cycle oscillates. Once convinced that a policy issue has been addressed, public interest wanes and so does the constituency basis for policy support. Unless the new policy has located a steadfast political constituency to back its claims upon scarce resources, it is subject to sharp discontinuities of contraction; it is frequently oversold at the beginning of the cycle and incapable of fulfilling such promises. Or, alternatively, once the primary goals are achieved, it proves difficult to sustain momentum and a base of political support for secondary goals. "Nonincremental policy is in essence unstable, devoid of middle ground between self-generating states of growth and decay."[19] Incremental policy is more resistant to swings in the issue attention cycle. In this stability, it responds more slowly in both the underscaling and overscaling stages.

Despite this, variations in the *issue attention cycle* may be less disruptive upon educational policy than upon other policy areas. The locus of educational decision making in an independently established, local, political process as well as its ongoing role in state and, now, federal government requires that continual attention be directed toward constituency needs. Particularly at the local level organizational processes are in place to handle much of this input on a daily basis and educators must constantly respond to pressures generated by the public. Consequently, when major shifts in attention do occur, there may be less disruption in basic policy. The political base of education permits more sensitive and continuous monitoring of and adjustment to public interests. Indeed, the losses in terms of good policy assessment due to miscuing and overwhelming feedback may be offset by the gains due to the relative invulnerability of educational policy to the vagaries and disruptions of major swings in the issue attention cycle. Since there are few such undetected major or dramatic shifts in public attention to educational problems, a rational-comprehensive approach to decision making may be less useful and can be disruptive if the resulting policy decision creates rather than responds to shifts in the issue attention cycle.

E. Effects of Organizational Redundancy

Organizational characteristics also influence the choice of a decision-making strategy. Incrementalism relies upon the pursuit of short-term goals by different units in an organization and upon the resulting conflicts and mistakes among organizational actors for the refinement of policy. It argues that the short-run duplication of resources and effort is less wasteful in the long term than is a strategy of stream-lined decision making focusing on immediate, narrowly efficient solutions. Organizational redundancy appears to enhance the quality of policy.[20] Thus, when an organization has a relative abundance of resources, incremental decision making may be preferable.

Organizations facing conditions of little or no slack may be less able to employ incremental decision strategies. "The less redundant are an organization's resources, the smaller the proportion of those resources will it rationally be willing to invest in learning processes that promise marginal improvements in future policies."[21] In such cases "the sacrifice of some resources now for a little more knowledge later may prevent it from surviving long enough to apply the knowledge gained."[22] Under extreme conditions, despite the increased likelihood of failure, only a well-

planned and explicitly coordinated strategy committing all available resources holds out the logical possibility of success. As resources diminish so does the comparative advantage of trial and error policy definition.

The decentralized structure and geographic dispersion of American education at the local and state level create a basic redundancy in educational organization and program and limit efforts to coordinate policy in any rational-comprehensive approach. Since school districts have broadly defined recourse to their own sources of revenue and are independent units of government, redundancy is generic. The course of school district consolidation and cooperation testifies to the values attached to localism and independence in education despite any merits of cost-efficiency or programmatic diversity. Although scarcity and conditions of financial exigency do tend to centralize and coordinate decision making to some degree, this can have only limited impact upon the pattern of educational decision making. The basic role of education in society and its direct pipeline to local tax resources ensure its continuation as one of the policy areas least subject to rational-comprehensive approaches to policy.

F. Effects of the Distribution of Power

The usefulness of incrementalism as a decision-making strategy is also dependent upon the distribution of power within the organization and its environment. If this strategy is to work well, it relies upon the availability of a bargaining arena and the participation of those affected. Feedback and coordination are achieved by competition. The market mechanism which translates values and preferences into patterns of resource allocation or policy output relies on a reasonable distribution of resources and input within the decision-making organization. When too much inequality of power exists, the self-correcting mechanism of the market cannot operate very effectively. Insofar as incremental decision making is a self-adjusting strategy dependent upon the process of mutual adjustment between interested parties for feedback, its effectiveness is reduced if power and access are too unevenly distributed among participants in the process and if the outcome is skewed in favor of the preference of only the powerful.[23]

Several facets of the nature and distribution of power in educational organizations appear to predispose to incrementalist strategies in decision making. First is the basis of education as a profession. As professionals, teachers and administrators are specialists both in the nature of their knowledge and the organization of their expertise. This circumscribes the power relationship between teacher and administrator in many areas of mutual concern and increases pressures for more consultative rather than authoritarian exchanges. This is also evident in the relationship between school boards and administrators where laymen are primarily dependent upon superintendents for the flow and quality of information. As a result, educational policy is the product of bargaining among affected groups. Bargaining most frequently requires incremental procedures in order to achieve a modicum of compromise and produces incremental policy results in most cases.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the pluralistic organization of institutions of education and a democratic value system stressing participation ensure a distribution of power and access sufficient to perform a veto function over major policy shifts. In this pluralistic approach, it is much easier to prevent major change than to negotiate it. The result is that when change occurs, it is at the margin rather than at the center of policy. As Murphy concludes in his assessment of the pitfalls encountered in implementing Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

> The federal system—with its dispersion of power and control—not only permits but encourages the evasion and dilution of federal reform, making it nearly impossible for the federal administrator to impose program priorities; those not diluted by congressional intervention can be ignored during state and local implementation.[24]

G. Effects of Organizational Maturity

Some relationship between organizational maturity and policy approach has been found although much work remains to be done in this area.[25] Preliminary findings substantiate the pattern of incremental decision strategies in organizations of specific ages or levels of maturity.

1. The less mature an agency the greater the changes in its policy actions. The more mature an agency, the less the changes in its policy actions.
2. As agencies get older, the magnitude of change in appropriations decreases and moves from a period of oscillation to a period of acceleration. This suggests that youthful agencies change their patterns of policy actions rapidly and sporadically but that more mature agencies settle into a pattern in which the rate of change in their actions moves in a rather predictable and steady direction.
3. As agencies get older, they get larger (in terms of total personnel) but the magnitude of change decreases.[26]

Aging appears to produce similar organizational effects and policy consequences.[27] Age increases budget and personnel and slowly creates stability of goals. It enhances the organization's ability to respond skillfully to changes in the social environment and to redefine policy areas as appropriate. Policy activity appears to be associated with conditions of moderate tenure and turnover. Too little turnover or very short tenure, like too high turnover or excessive tenure, appears to result in decreasing policy activity.[28] By implication, organizational maturity and stability increase reliance upon familiar strategies of incremental decision making. Major policy shifts are the products of younger, smaller, or severely threatened organizations; and the decision-making strategies of such organizations are more likely to be rational-comprehensive.

Educational organizations, generally, are long established. Only in the new and the threatened or dying educational enterprise can a departure from the incremental policy pattern be discerned. In such cases a certain degree of entrepreneurial behavior is associated with those institutions which are struggling either to carve a niche for themselves or to prevent imminent fiscal exigency. For example, new special district educational agencies set up to deal with and coordinate problems of the handicapped have demonstrated initiative which frequently impinges on the traditional territorial boundaries of existing programs. Organizational requirements are predisposed toward such major policy shifts. In the example of local schools, those most threatened with closing by declining enrollments are frequently most open to change. New programs are sought in the effort to increase the clientele and constituent base needed to ensure adequate support in the political arena. In both cases, policy initiatives offer substantive rather than marginal change. Decision-making patterns are more centrally coordinated and rational-comprehensive, in such cases, in order to meet the demands of "age and stage" in the life cycle of an organization.

Conclusion

Many proponents of policy analysis in education summarily dismiss incrementalism as "muddling through" and tinkering with the status quo. Instead, the promise of a rationalistic policy analysis which deals with problems on a more complete and scientific basis is held out. To the educational armory of planning and system analysis now is added the weapon of policy analysis in its rational-comprehensive form. The glitter of such an approach would, however, appear to be predominantly intellectual. In the practical world of substantive decisions, the question

remains, "Is the general formula for better policymaking one of more science and more political ambition or a new and improved muddling?"[22]

The environment and organizational framework of educational policymaking appear to be strongly predisposed toward incrementalism in decision making. In other words, the bias towards incrementalism results from the underlying structure of the educational policy process as an effect, not a cause. All approaches to decision making are fundamentally constrained by the decentralized, pluralistic, and politically rooted policy process in education at all levels. Any effort to reconstruct the policy process in education into the rational-comprehensive model must be preceded by a fundamental restructuring of the political and economic framework in which that process is embedded. We must take care not to demand as a policy outcome that which is structurally impossible.

For most critics of educational policy, "the most frequent and basic objection is not to simple incremental analysis of incremental alternatives actually on the political agenda; it is, instead, to the political practice of change only by increment. That is to say, the objection is not to incremental analysis but to the incremental politics to which incremental analysis is nicely suited."[30] For educators the key policy question remains one of adjusting the desired policy outcome to the structural and procedural constraints of a democratically based process. The policy problem is one of working with groups in such a way that their interactions will produce acceptable policy.[31]

Incrementalism is a relatively old and well-developed analytic framework and strategy for decision making. As such, it can provide a basis for research and teaching in the areas of educational policy and decision making. It has had little audience in the literature of educational administration and policy to date. I would suggest that the theory of incrementalism offers a productive resource and strategy for thinking through policy problems in education. It deserves more serious attention from practitioners and researchers alike. Only at our peril can we neglect much of the useful information gleaned in the past 20 years about this approach to policy. Incrementalism appears to be most suited to the basic environmental and organizational characteristics of educational policymaking in this country.

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9. Since Lindblom's formulation of the incremental strategy of decision making, the theory has been expanded and refined by many. It has had its broadest impact in the area of budgetary decision making and provided the main theoretical foundation for basic research in this area. In particular, Wildavsky's theory of the budgetary process and the extensive dialogue generated by it constitute the most substantial and significant theoretical component of the incrementalist approach. However, these very extensive and highly theoretical applications are beyond the scope of this paper. The seminal work in this field was done by Aaron Wildavsky and first presented by Otto A. Davis, M.A.H. Dempster, and A. Wildavsky, "A Theory of the Budgetary Process," *American Political Science Review* 60 (September 1966): 529-47.
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